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Lillian Beynon Thomas

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Lillian Beynon Thomas

Between 1907 and 1917 Lillian Beynon Thomas became one of the most influential women on the Canadian prairies. Writing under the pseudonym "Lillian Laurie" she developed the women's page of the *Weekly Free Press and Prairie Farmer* into a forum for debate and discussion on all issues affecting the lives of prairie women. In 1912 she became one of the founding members of the Political Equality League and helped to lead the fight to win women suffrage. As a teacher, journalist, suffragist, social reformer, playwright and novelist, Lillian Beynon Thomas made a substantial contribution to Manitoba history.

Teacher and Journalist

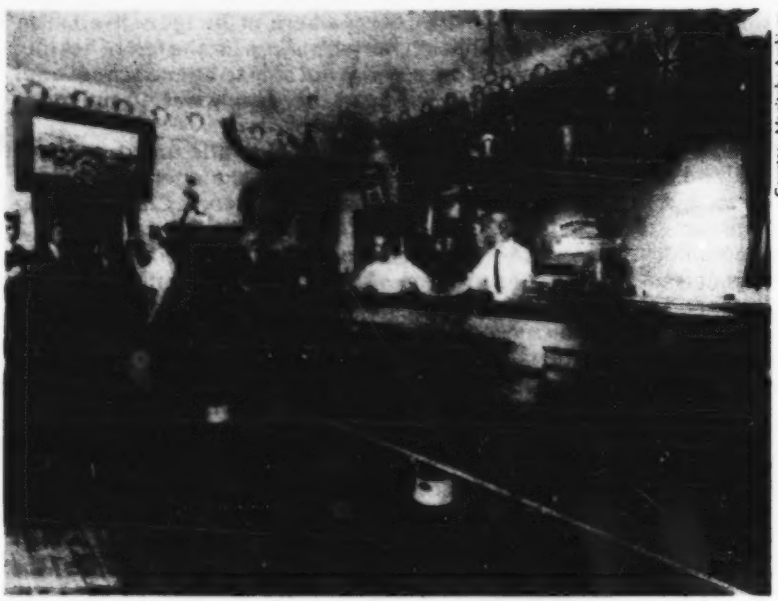
Lillian Beynon Thomas was born of Irish-Canadian Methodist stock in Kings, Ontario on 4 September 1874. Shortly after her birth, the Beynon family moved to Streetsville, York County where, at the age of five, Lillian was involved in an accident that left her with a limp for the rest of her life. She spent five years convalescing and was not able to attend school until the age of ten. Within another five years, her family was on the move again, this time to a farm near Hartney, Manitoba.

Lillian continued her schooling in Portage la Prairie until her father died and her family moved to Winnipeg. Here she attended Normal School and in 1896 received a non-Professional Second Class Teaching Certificate. For the next nine years she taught in various rural communities in Manitoba, an experience which nurtured her deep sympathies for the plight of farm women and which influenced the beliefs and sense of social concern that guided her in the coming years.

In 1905, when Lillian received her Bachelor of Arts Degree from Wesley College and her Professional Second Class Teaching Certificate, there were very few women attending university. In fact, only eleven per cent of all graduates were women, and Thomas later admitted that she had then considered herself quite an intellectual. At that time, education was one of the only professional careers considered acceptable for women — even for one who viewed herself an intellectual — and Lillian had to content herself with a teaching position at a high school in Morden, Manitoba. It was not until she met John W. Dafoe, editor of the *Manitoba Free Press*, that she was given a chance to pursue the writing career that was her greatest ambition.

When Lillian left her teaching position to join the staff of the newspaper in June 1907, she had not expected Dafoe to assign her to the women's page on the *Weekly Free Press and Prairie Farmer*. Whatever disappointment she may have experienced quickly dissipated when she discovered that her column, "Home Loving Hearts", could provide a forum for the discussion of the political and social problems of rural women. Writing under the pseudonym, "Lillian Laurie", Thomas developed her "page for women and girls" into a clearing house of advice, debate and information for the women scattered across the prairie landscape in towns, villages and isolated homesteads. Within a short time, "Lillian Laurie" became a household word on the prairies.

From the start, Thomas maintained that her column was not going to perpetuate stereotypic female roles. Telling her audience "how to be beautiful" or "how to win a husband" was of little or no consequence in light of the serious problems confronted by the women whose letters she published in her column. These letters told the story of wives who had been abandoned and mistreated and who had no legal right to their husband's farms or their children. Through this correspondence, Lillian began to realize that the existing laws did little to protect women's property or human rights. She began to use her column to advocate reforms. She called for the establishment of a dower law, for the allocation of farm holdings for women and for temperance legislation, which would prohibit the sale of liquor, a major cause of so many sold farms and abandoned or mistreated women and children.



Courtesy Manitoba Archives

Fighting for prohibition and the elimination of saloons, such as this became one of Lillian Beynon Thomas' main aims.

Lillian also encouraged her readers to write and articulate their views and often forced them to rethink their stand on various issues. For example, she was very outspoken in her support of unwed mothers and their illegitimate children at a time when both were socially ostracized. In many respects, she was years ahead of her time, and it was soon evident that she had the "courage of her convictions and a persistence in

maintaining her ideals." She quickly came to realize that many of the changes she advocated would only become a reality if women won the vote. With others like Nellie McClung and her sister, Francis Marion Beynon, Lillian Beynon Thomas became actively involved in the suffrage movement.

Lillian Beynon Thomas, Suffragist

Manitoba was one of the few provinces where there was considerable enthuasiasm for women's suffrage prior to 1910. This was due, in part, to the activities of Manitoba's Icelandic women, a group of immigrants who wanted the same voting rights in their new home as they had enjoyed in Iceland. The suffrage movement also grew in response to the social conditions that existed in the province at this time.

Immigration had increased significantly during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In Winnipeg, commercial and industrial activity was greatly expanded, and rapid boom-bust cycles contributed to poverty and urban-overcrowding. These changes also affected the traditional roles of women and the family, as wives and mothers began to look for work outside the home. In the country, women had to cope with problems of isolation, loneliness and the hardships of homesteading. Alcoholism was a major problem in urban and rural areas, a fact which only added to the burdens of many women.

In 1885, the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) was formed by a group of progressive Manitoba women who were interested in social reform. Inspired in part by the message of the social gospel preachers who spoke of the possibilities of a "heaven on earth", these women came to believe that the prohibition of alcohol would help to cure many social ills. The temperance movement quickly developed to include women's suffrage, which was viewed as the main prerequisite in the achievement of temperance and other social reforms. By 1893 the WCTU undertook measures to secure the provincial vote for women, but the defeat of the extended franchise bill in the legislature convinced the union that a separate suffrage society was needed and, in 1894, the Equal Franchise Society was born.

With the defeat of the franchise legislation and the return of prosperity, suffrage activity decreased somewhat over the next decade. Nevertheless, a major gain was made by 1906 when property-owning women were given the municipal vote. Due to a vested interest in the sale of liquor, the Manitoba government removed this right in 1906 after the women of Carman, Manitoba demonstrated that they had the power to put through a prohibition vote. The action of the government raised cries of indignation from many women across the province, and gave the suffrage movement new momentum. It drew concerned people, like Lillian Beynon Thomas into the fight for women's rights.

Lillian and her sister Francis, who edited the women's page in the *Grain Grower's Guide*, began to use their columns as forums for the dissemination of suffrage news and ideas. Both sisters used their journalistic talents in the cause of political equality and were able to exert considerable influence over the formulation and direction of rural

opinion on the suffrage issue. Writing and public affairs occupied the Beynons both professionally and in their spare time. They organized the Quill Club in November 1908 to bring local writers together to discuss their craft and the issues of the day. It is interesting to note that at the club's last meeting in November 1909, most of the evening was devoted to the topic of women's suffrage.

In 1910 Beynon Thomas was also involved in the formation of the Homemakers' Clubs of Saskatchewan. These clubs, which eventually became hives of suffrage activity, were a project of the Extension Service of the University of Saskatchewan. At the invitation of Dean Rutherford, Lillian accompanied Professors Willing, Bracken and Scharfe to fairs in various communities where they spoke on the need for women to join together to improve the quality of rural life. The project was a success. The first annual Homemakers' Convention was held in Regina in 1911, with Lillian presiding as chairperson over fifty elected delegates.

Courtesy Manitoba Archives

The executive of the Manitoba Political Equality League with suffrage petitions, 1915; Lillian is probably the woman standing in the upper left hand corner.

Previous suffrage work in Manitoba laid the foundation for the formation of the Political Equality League (PEL) in 1912. Organized by a group of educated middle class women, the league was to become the strongest and most vocal suffrage lobby in Manitoba. Among its first members were Nellie McClung, E. Cora Hind, Mrs. F. J. Dixon, Francis Beynon and Lillian Beynon Thomas, the league's first president. Their goal, Lillian argued, was to show Manitobans what political equality could mean to "women and children who were in the power of weak, coarse, unfair, sick or brutal men."

The PEL relied on the distribution of pamphlets, petition campaigns and peaceful demonstrations to publicize their cause. The violent tactics and militancy of the British suffragettes were rejected because, as Lillian pointed out, violence was considered "a last resort" to be used only when all peaceful attempts to win the vote had been exhausted. In addition to petitions and pamphlets, the league also organized a speakers bureau, chaired by Lillian Beynon Thomas. Under her direction, well-trained speakers travelled across the province to bring the suffrage message to all who were willing to listen. As she once observed, the campaign was not an easy one; league speakers and organizers were often mocked and insulted by men and women alike. Lillian herself was an active spokesperson, and one newspaper noted that although she held "radical views on women's economic independence," she was always reasonable in her approach, a talent which allowed her to "speak to mixed audiences on votes for women . . . without antagonizing them."

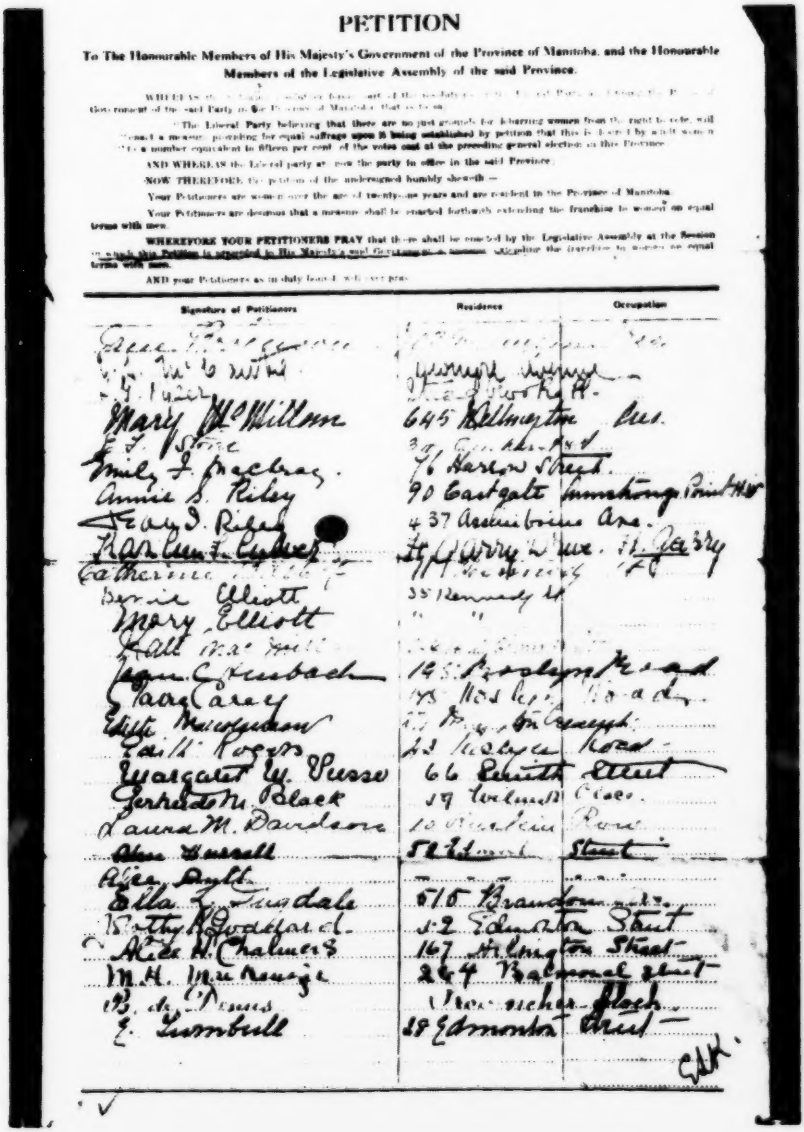
The PEL made numerous appeals to the provincial government. Sir Rodmond Roblin, the Conservative premier, saw the suffragists many times but consistently resisted their demands for the vote. The Liberal opposition was more sympathetic and in the election of 1910 adopted women's suffrage as a plank in their party's platform. Despite campaigning by suffrage supporters, the Liberals were defeated, and in 1913 the Conservative government was successful in its bid to block the introduction of suffrage legislation. In the election of 1914, the Liberals once again agreed to endorse votes for women on the condition that twenty thousand men sign a petitition in support of the extended franchise. The signatures were collected but, as before, the Conservatives were returned to power.

Manitoba's suffragists were far from ready to give up the struggle. In 1914, inspired by a skit she had seen in Vancouver, Lillian came up with an idea designed to demonstrate the absurdity of the arguments used by those who opposed the extended franchise. In two afternoon and evening shows at the Walker Theatre in Winnipeg, the Women's Press Club organized a mock parliament where the roles were reversed, and men came to women begging for the vote. By turning the tables the suffragists hoped to make politicians and others see the validity of their demands. The audience, which included a number of cabinet ministers and backbenchers who had been shamed into attending, sat and listened as Nellie McClung and others explained why "beautiful and cultured men" should not receive the vote. Witty, humorous and pointed in its satirization, the mock parliament was considered by many to be the turning point in the suffrage campaign.

Courtesy Manitoba Archives

T.C. Norris, leader of the Liberal party.

The fall of the Roblin government in May 1915 over the legislative building scandal was all the suffragists needed to guarantee full success. Liberal leader T.C. Norris formed an interim government and, in the election of 6 August 1915, his party was swept into power. Shortly after his victory, Norris announced that suffrage legislation would be forthcoming once his government received a petition signed by at least 17,000 people who supported the vote for women. On 23 December a delegation of sixty men and women presented the premier with two petitions: the official document contained 39,584 signatures, while the other included 4,250 names collected by ninety-four year old Amelia Burritt of Sturgeon Creek.



PETITION

To The Honourable Members of His Majesty's Government of the Province of Manitoba, and the Honourable Members of the Legislative Assembly of the said Province.

WHEREAS [illegible] Government of the said Party in the Province of Manitoba that it is on

"The Liberal Party believing that there are no just grounds for debarring women from the right to vote, will "enact a measure providing for equal suffrage upon it being established by petition that this is desired by adult women "to a number equivalent to fifteen per cent. of the votes cast at the preceding general election in this Province."

AND WHEREAS the Liberal party are now the party in office in the said Province.

NOW THEREFORE the petition of the undersigned humbly sheweth —

Your Petitioners are women over the age of twenty-one years and are resident in the Province of Manitoba.

Your Petitioners are desirous that a measure shall be enacted forthwith extending the franchise to women on equal terms with men.

WHEREFORE YOUR PETITIONERS PRAY that there shall be enacted by the Legislative Assembly at the Session at which this Petition is presented to His Majesty's said Government a measure extending the franchise to women on equal terms with men.

AND your Petitioners as in duty bound will ever pray.

Signature of Petitioners	Residences	Occupation
Mary McWilliam	645 Ellington Ave.	
Emily F. Peachey.	76 Harlow Street	
Annie S. Riley	90 Eastgate Winnipeg Point Hill	
Mary S. Riley	437 Assiniboine Ave.	
[illegible]	[illegible]	
Bessie Elliott	35 Kennedy St	
Mary Elliott	[illegible]	
[illegible]	[illegible]	
[illegible]	145 Brooklyn Road	
Mary Carey	[illegible]	
[illegible]	[illegible]	
[illegible]	[illegible]	
Margaret M. Pusse	66 Pelissier Street	
Gertrude M. Black	19 Telfords Place	
Laura M. Davidson	10 Maulson Row	
Alex Russell	582 [illegible]	Student
Alice Smith	[illegible]	
Ella L. Tingsdale	616 Brandon Ave.	
Dorothy R. Woodfall	512 Edmonton Street	
Alice H. Chalmers	167 Wellington Street	
M.H. McKenzie	264 Balmoral Street	
[illegible]	[illegible]	
E. Trumbull	58 Edmonton Street	

Courtesy Manitoba Archives

A sample of the petitions signed by Manitobans in support of women's suffrage.

One final confrontation occurred before the measure granting women suffrage was introduced in January 1916 and received royal assent on 28 January. Prior to the opening of the legislature a friend passed a copy of the draft legislation to Lillian Beynon Thomas. She quickly discovered that while it granted the vote to women, it also contained a clause prohibiting them from sitting in the legislature. Lillian immediately contacted her sister Francis who was attending the annual convention of the Grain Growers' Association in Brandon. Realizing that she was in a good strategical position, Francis contacted a Liberal henchman and informed him that if the restrictive clause were retained, she would have a motion of censure of the Liberal government passed at the women's meeting of the GGA, which would be brought before the main convention at the closing evening session. The threat quickly brought results, and the clause was dropped.

In 1916, Manitoba became the first Canadian province to grant women suffrage. Even though they had not yet secured the right to hold positions on bodies of civic government, women had won the main battle. In her column, "Home Loving Hearts", Lillian Beynon Thomas wrote a fitting epitaph for the campaign: "It is all over now, even the shouting. The women of Manitoba are now citizens, persons, human beings, who have stepped politically out of the class of criminals, children, idiots and lunatics."

The Later Years

During the period in which Lillian was working as a journalist and actively campaigning as a suffragist, she also devoted part of her time to social welfare concerns. In 1912 she led a campaign to acquire nurses for rural districts through her column in *The Weekly Free Press and Prairie Farmer*. She arranged for care parcel exchanges between her have and have-not readers and wrote several articles in the *Christian Guardian* and *Canadian Monthly* on the social welfare work of J.S. Woodsworth.

In 1911 Lillian married a colleague, A.V. Thomas, who supported her political and literary work, and in 1917 the couple moved to New York. While there she began to study short-story writing at Columbia University and, through the Episcopal Church, became involved in helping to improve the lot of shipwrecked sailors. She even edited a small in-house newspaper for the Seaman's Institute called "The Lookout". Frequent visits to the New York stage also began to inspire her interest in the theatre and playwriting.

Both Lillian and her husband suffered ill health, and in 1922 they returned to Winnipeg. Vernon Thomas began work with the *Winnipeg Tribune* and Lillian continued to write short stories, taught creative writing and became involved in local theatre groups. In 1927 she won $400.00 from *MacLean's Magazine* for a short story, "Five Cents for Luck" and soon after won two $1000.00 prizes from McFadden Publications for short-story writing. Her first play, a comedy about rural Ontario politics in the 1880s and 90s entitled, "Among the Maples", opened in Winnipeg in April 1932 to favourable reviews. In 1933 another Beynon Thomas play, "Jim Barber's Spite Fence" won second place at the Dominion Drama

Festival. The following year another drama, "As the Twig is Bent", won a $300.00 prize at the Coach House Theatre in Wisconsin. In 1936 Lillian Beynon Thomas won a Canadian Drama Award in recognition of her outstanding service to the development of Canadian drama. Ten years later, her only novel, *New Secret*, a book exploring life in the age of the atomic bomb, was published.

Courtesy Manitoba Archives

Lillian Beynon Thomas autographing her novel *New Secret*, published in 1946.

Lillian's husband died in September 1950 and her sister Francis passed away one year later. Lillian herself died on 2 September, 1961, just two days short of being eighty-seven years old. Throughout her life she maintained her membership in The Women's Press Club, the Canadian Author's Association, the University Women's Club of Winnipeg and served on the executive of many different organizations. Her interest in any live topic remained keen until her death. In a 1950 interview Lillian remarked: "I'm glad to be living in an age of such perplexing problems. They present a challenge to all thinking Canadians."

Despite her moderate success as a Manitoba playwright and novelist, Lillian Beynon Thomas' most significant contributions were made between 1907 and 1917 through her work as an advocate journalist, suffragist and social reformer. The name "Lillian Laurie" and the column "Home Loving Hearts" were an integral part of the struggle for women's rights in this province. The name Lillian Beynon Thomas will remain an important one in Manitoba history.

Suggestions for Further Reading

The reader may want to consult a number of general volumes on women's history which include: Catherine L. Cleverdon, *The Woman Suffrage Movement in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1950); Gwen Matheson (ed.), *Women in the Canadian Mosaic* (Toronto: Peter Martin Assoc. Ltd., 1976) and Ramsey Cook and Wendy Mitchinson (ed.), *The Proper Sphere: Woman's Place in Canadian Society* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1976).

A book by Nellie McClung, *The Stream Runs Fast* (Toronto: Thomas Allen Ltd., 1945) contained numerous references to the work of Lillian Beynon Thomas. Two articles in *The Manitoba Pageant* (September, 1959), "Manitoba Women Voted First" by Lillian Beynon Thomas and "Those Women!" by Irene Craig provide some interesting anecdotes on the woman and her times. The Lillian Beynon Thomas Collection at the Provincial Archives of Manitoba includes her articles, stories, reviews, correspondence and papers, and is an enormously useful research source.

Two other pamphlets entitled "Nellie McClung" and "E. Cora Hind" are also available at the Historic Resources Branch, Department of Cultural Affairs and Historical Resources.

Credits

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